

The Enigma

By Anne Stevenson

Falling to sleep last night in a deep crevasse
between one rough dream and another, I seemed,
still awake, to be stranded on a stony path,
and there the familiar enigma presented itself
in the shape of a little trembling lamb.
It was lying like a pearl in the trough between
one Welsh slab and another, and it was crying.

I looked around, as anyone would, for its mother.
Nothing was there. What did I know about lambs?
Should I pick it up? Carry it . . . where?
What would I do if it were dying? The hand
of my conscience fought with the claw of my fear.
It wasn't so easy to imitate the Good Shepherd
in that faded, framed Sunday School picture
filtering now through the dream's daguerreotype.

With the wind fallen and the moon swollen to the full,
small, white doubles of the creature at my feet
flared like candles in the creases of the night
until it looked to be alive with newborn lambs.
Where could they all have come from?
A second look, and the bleating lambs were birds—
kittiwakes nesting, clustered on a cliff face,
fixing on me their dark accusing eyes.

There was a kind of imperative not to touch them,
yet to be *of* them, whatever they were—
now lambs, now birds, now floating points of light—
fireflies signaling how many lost New England summers?
One form, now another; one configuration, now another.
Like fossils locked deep in the folds of my brain,
outliving a time by telling its story. Like stars.

Anne Stevenson, *Stone Milk* (Bloodaxe Books, 2007) at www.bloodaxebooks.com
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